

Response to Mike Rose, "[\*Rethinking Remedial Education and the Academic-Vocational Divide\*](#)" with responses from Sara Goldrick-Rab, Kris Guttierrez and Norton Grubb

# A Different Kind of Preparation for Work

## Helena Worthen

Mike Rose, Sara Goldrick-Rab, Kris Guttierrez, and Norton Grubb are all unhappy with remediation. Mike Rose tells how he avoided the skills-based remediation curriculum and prepared returning veterans for college entry by having them read John Donne, Big Bang theory and Aboriginal creation myths. Sara Goldrick-Rab urges policy-makers and researchers to fully rethink the purpose and function of remediation. Kris Guttierrez advocates for a sociocultural approach, paying attention to whole activity settings and using diversity itself as a resource for learning. Norton Grubb describes learning communities in community colleges where occupational/technical programs link up with academic programs. These are all ways to avoid or replace traditional forms of remediation.

The dissatisfaction with remediation, however, is secondary to what these authors agree is the main challenge which is that work – good work, decent jobs – appears to be the solution to broad social problems like high unemployment, dislocations due to globalization and new technology, the sagging economy and inequality generally. If jobs are the solution, then the role of schools should be to train people for work. This is a supply side solution; supply better-trained workers for jobs. But I also want to talk about a demand-side solution: train people to improve the jobs they have.

Unfortunately, no sooner do we agree that schools should train people for work than the remediation discourse takes over. This discourse chops learning up into skills. It's true that many people who arrive at schools like community colleges seeking training that will lead to work will be tested and assigned to below-college level reading or writing English classes where they suffer the indignities of remediation. Thus the door to job training really does open into remediation. But unfortunately, the discourse of remediation and the job training discourse are similar, in bad ways. Reading and writing are taught as sets of skills; so are dental assisting, food service management, cosmetology and auto repair.

We should note that "skills" is a unit of analysis that works all the way up and down the ladder, for policy makers, employers, and compensation specialists as well as for

teachers of individual workers. At the highest level of abstraction of our job training policy, the Department of Labor, skills are the basis for our Standard Occupational Classification system. This is framed in straight-up free market economics terms: The 1999 Report on the American Workforce says “assumptions of competitive capital and labor markets are fundamental to labor composition measures. These assumptions permit hourly earnings to be used to measure each type of worker’s contribution to output and therefore, as a measure of skill” (USDOL: 44). This means that the wages earned by workers who do a job are used to measure how skilled a job is. High wages equals high skills, for the purpose of the report. No other factors such as gender, ethnicity, age, or union representation (all social, historical, cultural factors) are assumed. Further down the page, the report adds, “Unionized workers earn more, on average, than nonunionized workers. Nonetheless, competitive firms will attempt to equate the prevailing wage, however it is determined, to the value of the worker’s marginal product.”

In real life, if I can use that phrase, how much someone gets paid (and therefore how skilled the work is, according to the Department of Labor) depends on lot of factors other than those learned and taught as skills. Most important is how well workers can organize, whether in a union or not, to protect and improve their jobs.

In the mid-nineties, in the middle of doing my dissertation research, I was teaching a class called “Basic Reading” at College of Alameda, part of the Oakland, CA Peralta community college system. I had forty students in this class, including ESL students, dislocated homemakers, people with head injuries, people on release from the jail, and students from the auto repair program. The class met four mornings a week for 50 minutes. The only books provided for the class were old hardbacks that had overflowed the library. It was a travesty. I tried poetry, newspapers and plays, and then one morning I looked at the students and said to myself, “These people don’t need this class; they need jobs.” Decent jobs – not working all night in a mom and pop restaurant, like some of the Asian girls who fell asleep the moment they sat down.

I finished up my dissertation and went looking for jobs in labor education and luckily, building on my experience as an elected officer, organizer and site rep for various levels of the California Federation of Teachers (AFT, AFL-CIO) I got hired, first in Philadelphia and then in Chicago and Champaign, Illinois. Then I tried to bring what I had learned about education to *labor* education, and vice versa.

My argument will be that “the intellectual challenges of work”, whether it’s for teaching, lawyering or picking lemons, goes far beyond individual job skills needed for isolated tasks because the real challenge is earning a living. While isolated tasks do, in themselves, constitute intellectual challenges, work in the sense of earning a

living is something much bigger. To earn a living one must know how to make an unsafe job safe, a humiliating job decent, build relationships with co-workers, improve the job enough to survive it, and understand enough about the economics of the job and the industry to negotiate effectively with the employer. These intellectual challenges arise whether we are talking about welders, nurses, school teachers, postal workers, bus drivers, laborers, farmers, steelworkers, building trades people, clerical workers – it doesn't matter. There are the tasks required for a job, and then there is earning a living. This is because manual labor is not just the performance of certain physical actions. It is also a way to make a living, a social identity, a way to be in the world with other people. It has history, politics, an aesthetic, and above all, it's about money.

One of my dissertation advisers was Norton Grubb and I was part of his team that observed over 200 community college classes to find out “what was going on” inside the classroom. Our work appears in his book, “Honored but Invisible: An Inside Look at Teaching in Community Colleges” (Routledge, 1999). For my unit of analysis, I chose literacy practices rather than skills. The concept of “practice” is a good way to escape the pull of the powerful skills discourse (see Lave and Wenger, 1991):

Comparing skills and practices, skills are:

- The property of an individual
- Acquired through instruction, developmentally, and once acquired, stable
- One of many innately-determined cognitive skills
- A-historical and outside culture, in the sense that all individuals of a certain skill level have equivalent skills regardless of place or point in time;
- Measurable as a unitary phenomenon, like IQ;
- Transformative; that is, capable changing mental processes or cognitive capacity

A practice, on the other hand, is:

- The property of a social structure (participant structure) rather than an isolated individual;
- Acquired through participation in the social practices that require it;
- Materially based but socially generated rather than innate;
- Initially emergent; later, developing or waning according to social demands;
- Dynamic, studied rather than measured;
- Historical and ideologically non-neutral
- Like oral speech, enabling self-reflection (rather than transformative, that is, capable of changing mental structures).

Using the unit of analysis of “practice” rather than skills, it was possible to see and compare the opportunities for learning in classes across the spectrum.

Our observations in the community colleges were also a good way to see the “academic-vocational divide” of Mike Rose’s title up close. It is not imaginary. Instructors who taught academic classes were almost completely oblivious of what went on in the programs of their vocational colleagues. Specifically, they had almost no appreciation of the kinds of literacy artifacts that were typical of occupational/technical learning: manuals, websites, blueprints, recipes, diagrams, formulas, maps, measuring devices, etc. Vocational instructors, on the other hand, were very aware of what went on over on the academic side, especially in remediation programs, and very critical: “My students don’t need no damn English class” was typical. Nor did either side appreciate the types of literacy practices (as compared to artifacts) of the other side, despite the fact that the best classes on both sides engaged in strikingly similar literacy practices that maximized opportunities for all students to learn. The divide, in other words, is not just two knowledge domain silos each endowed with its own social privilege or stigma. It exists on the ground, in hallways, parking lots and faculty meetings where instructors hardly spoke to each other. The chill was passed on to the students, too.

But coming to this project as someone with deep experience in the teachers union (and one that considers itself part of the broader labor movement), I could not help noticing that the majority of vocational classes were taught from the employer’s point of view, not from the worker’s point of view. (Exceptions were some joint college-union programs in the building trades and one union-sponsored food service delivery program, which were very interesting.) Thus the students learned nothing about labor and employment law, workers’ compensation, occupational safety and health or – especially – how to read, enforce or negotiate a contract, nothing about labor history or the history of labor struggles in their field, nothing about what union might or might not represent them. They might not even know how to read a paycheck to see if they were being paid as employees or independent contractors. They would be delivered to their first job interview as naïve about the social relations of their work as if they had just graduated from high school.

Labor education takes as its content domain all of these social relations. Mostly sited in land-grant universities around the US, and in some places in community colleges, labor education is the “applied” side of labor studies, which is an academic sister to labor education. Labor education is usually extension education, outreach to working people and the labor movement the way agricultural extension is outreach to farmers and agribusiness. Labor education programs burgeoned during the 1940s – 1960s; in the last forty years, they have become targets of the conservative political agenda. There is no doubt that the literacy artifacts of labor education qualify as

requiring advanced academic skills: reading and analyzing legal documents including court cases, labor board decisions, arbitrations; reading and writing contracts, grievances, safety complaints; doing strategic planning; administering an organization including budgeting; running elections; producing newsletters or websites; dealing with the media, just to begin the list. These are not taught as bitted-down (fragmented) skills, however, and the labor education classroom does not in any way resemble the remediation classroom. People with advanced degrees (social workers, teachers, nurses, grad students) sit next to and learn from custodians, bus drivers, clerical workers, homecare workers or construction workers. Teaching is very student-centered and strongly non-competitive. In the best classes, a community of practice is being created. Yet it would be very hard to argue that this is not “preparation for work.” Nor would you be able to place a class like this on one side or the other of the “academic divide.”

When I am asked what a working person needs to learn other than job skills, I remember some workers at a power plant in Illinois. It was an old, coal-fired plant that, because of some state legislation, had to use low-grade local coal that required treatment before it could be burned. The treatment used many strong chemicals. Like much of US infrastructure, this plant had gone without upgrading or adequate maintenance for many years. One day workers came in to find a leak that had formed a wide pool. They were given a direct order to clean it up. They had safety glasses, gloves and mops, but no respirators or hazmat suits. The source of the leak was hard to find and hard to fix, so the cleanup was still going on after a week when their supervisor told them that they needed hazmat suits and a week later when the supervisor brought in respirators. Workers soon began to wonder what risks they had been exposed to during the first and second weeks of the cleanup. Incidentally, in 2008 in the US, over 5,000 people died on the job. Our fatality rate is 6 times greater than that of Great Britain. I made a short list of what a worker who has received such a direct order might want to know in order to choose what to do:

How far should he trust his supervisor?

What is the substance on the floor?

What can it do to him?

What tools does he really need?

What are his legal and contractual rights (if any)?

What will happen to him if he refuses to mop it up?

Who else will stand with him? How should he communicate with those other workers?

What would life will be like for him if he loses his job?

The answers to some of these questions could be called “skills,” but the rest are about the social, historical and cultural context of his specific situation at work. And these are the ones that could save his life or kill him.

Mike Rose, Sara Goldrick-Rab, Kris Gutteriez and Norton Grubb deplore the conventional practices of remediation and are looking for ways that school can play a role that does not dishonor the educational needs of people who have to earn a living as wage workers. The knowledge domain of labor education, along with its social practices, is an example of another possibility.

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